

## Introduction: Depicting diversity

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Whether we are concerned with ethnic, religious, gender-, age-, sexuality- or disability-related diversities, social scientists, policy-makers and members of the general public tend to be conceptually confined to certain depictions of diversity. To depict something is to describe, to represent, to characterise. In so-doing – particularly surrounding something as socially, culturally and politically charged as 'diversity' – the act of depiction may serve to set or to limit a given discourse, to explore or to promote a particular theory of society, to define or to position a set of groups within a social hierarchy, and to structure or to implement a specific political agenda. Depictions of diversity arise in everyday communication; unwittingly or purposefully, they may become embodied in institutional practices and modes of national governance.

Studying depictions of diversity – their processes of production and reproduction, their effects and transformations – should be an essential task in social science and cultural studies today. Identities, human differences, social structures and patterns of inequality cannot be assumed to be of one kind: they are contextually conceived and enacted. Further research and theory is required in order to understand better the relationships between how diversities (and the groups within a varied social array) are imagined, how they related to social, economic and geographical characteristics, how such depictions reflect or influence social interactions, and how political systems

of diversity governance themselves utilise or create depictions of diversity.

Within the Department of Socio-Cultural Diversity at the Max-Planck-Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, which launches the UNESCO journal *Diversities* with this special issue, this topic is approached by way of a conceptual triad of 'configurations-representations-encounters' (see Vertovec 2009). In addressing any specific global context (regardless of scale), 'configurations' refer to how diversity is measured within specific structural and demographic conditions; 'representations' includes ways in which diversity is imagined or depicted, while 'encounters' considers the means and modes by way of which diversities are actually experienced in practice and social interaction. To call this a conceptual triad is to insist that – again with respect to whatever the context being researched – each part of the triad must be understood in light of the other two. Thus, for instance with regard to the theme of this issue, to better appreciate the ways in which a certain context of diversity is depicted (here, by students within Swiss schools, among artists and anti-racists within the 1980s French political and art scene, and by Russian and British policy-makers regarding relations to Muslim organisations), one must also gain a good grasp of the demographic and political-economic context as well as the nature of everyday interactions affecting the groups who employ said depictions. Through a kind of hermeneutic circle – or

better, in this case, triangle, researchers can achieve a more complete view on to diversity dynamics.

Each of the articles within this special issue of *Diversities* examines a range of inter-related issues of depiction, or how the dynamics of configurations-representations-encounters have unfolded within particular arenas. The works arise through IMISCOE ('Immigration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe'), the Network of Excellence established under the European Commission's Sixth Framework research programme (see [www.imiscoe.org](http://www.imiscoe.org)). The network links some 30 research institutes and over 500 researchers across Europe. Within IMISCOE, the research cluster on cultural, religious and linguistic diversity has organised numerous streams of research, events and publications. The cluster leaders have been especially keen to promote selected work by young scholars within the network, and the authors and articles presented here have been chosen from among those presented at an IMISCOE cluster workshop on 'Understanding diversity: Theoretical and methodological challenges' held in 2009 at the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen.

Reflecting one of the key research themes within the IMISCOE cluster (see Martiniello and Lafleur 2008), Angéline Escafré-Dublet's piece on 'Art, power and protest' engages significant questions surrounding the politics of representation. The study is set in the early 1980s amid the French public debates and activities surrounding the Anti-racism movement, the mobilisation of the so-called second generation (described at the time as 'children of immigration') and the national March for Equality and Against Racism, known as the *Marche des Beurs*. Escafré-Dublet's interest concerns immigrant artistic production and its relation to the anti-racism political movement. She interrogates the contemporary debates on anti-racism alongside depictions of diversity within a particular national and historical configuration. In this study, we might say that depiction refers to art as a mode of

political expression vis-à-vis its (tokenistic?) inclusion in the art world as 'immigrant art'. A conundrum surrounding such art and expression to this day, notes Escafré-Dublet, is that 'from the point of view of immigrant activists, it is never political enough; from the point of view of immigrant artists, it is never artistic enough.'

Reflecting a Barthian approach to ethnic boundary construction, Kerstin Duemmler, Janine Dahinden and Joëlle Moret offer their study on 'Gender equality as "cultural stuff" '. And in line with Fredrik Barth's salient view, they are interested in the social organisation of cultural difference. Cultural difference – the 'stuff' of the title – is not assumed a priori, but seen to arise in the conceptual or discursive marking of boundaries in everyday interactions, here within Swiss schools. The authors observe in group discussions among students the reification of notions of culture, tradition and gender relations. In this way processes of group-making and group-marking are seen through discursive processes of categorisation. We are provided accounts of how young people make distinctions about attitudes to gender, how these become ethnicised and, in turn, how they create moral hierarchies and assertions of exclusion, superiority and dominance. Duemmler et al. provide a lucid account of the dynamics and effects of representations (of what is 'culturally different') within patterns of everyday encounter.

Finally, in Ekaterina Braginskaia's contribution, we are presented, as it were, with a play on two meanings of representation: as group image and as group voice. Braginskaia takes a comparative look at state roles in formulating these two senses of representation through comparative research on central state policies for the engagement of Islamic organisations in Russia and Britain. The cases comprise very different, and therefore very telling, configurations of ethnicity and religion. In Britain a broad, contemporary policy framework is framed around rhetorics of community cohesion. In Russia, policy con-

tinues a long historical legacy of politically containing national minorities. Yet both countries today temper their policies with respect to common concerns of securitisation (since now both countries have fairly recent experiences of Islamic terrorism). Respective government policies and institutes for relations with Muslim umbrella organisations show not only differential depictions of religious diversity, but also contrasting strategies for managing it. Braginskaia shows how the British government tends to delegate matters to local levels, while the Russian government favours centralisation.

Of course, questions of depiction do not just occur within schools, political movements and governments. The media, workplaces, and public spaces of many kinds give rise to myriad ways of depicting diversities. Further, in order to better reflect on the processes, functions and outcomes of various modes of depiction, social scientists must consider the ways that they themselves selectively depict how various actors and institutions practice, create and represent diversity. We all employ depictions of diversity, and the most culturally sensitive, politically productive and analytically valuable depictions will be those entailing a high degree of critical self-reflection.

## References

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## About the author

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In the *Open Forum* of this issue, Weishan Huang discusses how culture and economics intertwine in urban re-structuring before and after the 1990 recession in New York City by using the case study of Flushing, Queens. In her article, Dorottya Nagy aims to localise China in its relation to World Christianity and vice versa, focusing on issues such as transnational communities, ecumenical understanding, contextualisation and theological pluralism. The *Open Forum* papers illuminate how we may understand complex social phenomena using a guiding principle of 'super-diversity'.

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